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A nerd take on school shootings

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by [David Beard](#)

One of my favorite little people grew up fast when he was 5 years old. One night, after his 8 p.m. bedtime, he woke up to find his mom gone. (She went jogging while he was asleep.) When she came home, he was scared: "What would I do if the bad guys came?"

Within a few months, though, he was wearing Spider-Man masks and riding his bicycle alongside his mom while she jogged. He could take care of the bad guys. He became the hero of the story.

I hear his tiny hero's voice in my head as I listen to videos of [ALICE training in schools](#). ALICE stands for "Alert, Lock Down, Inform, Counter, Evacuate." For "countering" a school shooter, children are told to throw things, bite and hit.

The program claims that this will distract the shooter and disrupt their aim. But listening to the children in ALICE videos, there is an excited heroism in their voices. Second graders, biting and hitting, might take care of the bad guys.

Rewriting the story of school shootings

The problem of school shootings is being rewritten. It's not an avoidable, social problem. Instead, a school shooting is being rewritten as an unavoidable conflict, a story of a villain and a hero. As NRA executive vice president Wayne LaPierre says, "The only way to stop a bad guy with a gun is with [a good guy with a gun](#)."

Using the language of archetypes and the examples of "Star Wars," I hope to explain that the hero story is appealing because it bolsters the bravery and exceptionality of the "good guy with a gun." And, I hope to demonstrate that while there is a power in imagining that you are the hero of the story, there is a greater power in writing a different story.

Why is the story of a good guy with a gun appealing?

The appeal of the hero story for school shootings can be explained through the [archetypes](#) that makes "Star Wars" so appealing.

- The archetypal hero story is attractive for three reasons:
- The "good guy with a gun" is stronger than the bad guy.
- The "good guy with a gun" is stronger than the people without guns.

In the end, the "good guy with a gun" is wiser, nobler and just plain different from everyone else.

First, in most hero stories, the hero conquers the same "dragon" to which the villain has fallen victim. Darth Vader has succumbed to the Dark Side, but Luke never will. The bad guy uses his gun on innocents. The good guy with a gun is stronger than the bad guy, using his gun only for good.

Second, the hero goes alone. Others remain behind. Luke faces Vader alone; Han and Leia remain behind. Those who insist on lockdowns or gun control laws, rather than facing the bad guy ... They remain behind, too. Wayne LaPierre never invokes a team of good guys, working together. It's always one good guy, alone.

Finally, when the battle is won, the hero stands alongside men and women who don't understand the hero's path. The good guy with a gun is a different kind of person: nobler and wiser, than everyone else. (Chewie and Han may get medals, but only Luke is on the path to become a Jedi.)

As I spend hours discussing, listening, and debating with arming school staff as the solution to shootings, I am filled with questions. My friends, believers in the story of a good guy with a gun, must think I am like Han or Chewbacca. I don't understand their Jedi ways. I don't understand the guns. I don't understand the right to self-defense. I don't understand their experience. Their path is different from mine.

"Star Wars" is one example of the hero's story. Harry Potter faces Voldemort alone and his family never understands. Spider-Man must face Doctor Octopus alone and Aunt May will never understand. This hero's story is written into our storytelling DNA.

I'm not suggesting that all advocates for the "good guy with a gun" story have a desire to be Jedi. I am explaining why some hold the story close to their hearts. The storyline makes them stronger than the shooter, stronger than me, and really, someone whose experience is beyond my ability to understand.

Why is it problematic to be the hero of this story?

I think about that little boy in the Spider-Man jammies and the Spider-Man T-shirt. I want him to be the hero of his story, braver and stronger and exceptional in every way.

I don't want him biting a man with an AR-15.

The training offered by ALICE doesn't make him the hero of his story. It makes him Garven Dreis. (Who?) In "Star Wars," Garven was "Red Leader," shot down by Vader, giving Luke time to take his shot at destroying the Death Star. You probably didn't even know he had a name. When we teach our students to bite and throw their notebooks, distracting the man with a gun, we are teaching them to be Garven Dreis until the good guy with a gun shows up.

If I have to live within the "Star Wars" story, I want to be Luke. So does every advocate for increased gun ownership as the solution to the school shootings problem.

No one advocating for the good guy with the gun wants to be — or wants their child to be — Garven Dreis.

Tell a different story

If you have to live within the hero's story, it's best to be the hero. But there is another option.

I want us to write a different story, one where we don't need a hero to save us from the dragon. One, even, where the dragon doesn't need to die.

Maybe laws take the fangs from the dragon (regulating the purchase of AR-15s).

Maybe technology takes the fangs from the dragon (biometrically locked firearms).

Maybe we detect the dragons earlier, keeping them from being a threat (keeping firearms from those with domestic violence convictions).

I'd be happy to replace the duel between Vader and Skywalker with a really tense conversation over a cup of coffee, ending with a handshake. I want us to rewrite the script.

One my favorite episodes of "Doctor Who," a nerd property far superior to "Star Wars" in every way, is "The Doctor Dances." In the episode, a herd of zombified humans are exposed to a nanogene that heals all of them. "Just this once," the Doctor exclaims, "everybody lives."

I want that story. We can write something else.

Credits



David Beard

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